



From left, environmental supervisor Lyndon Bucher with American Colloid, Big Horn County Commissioner Keith Grant, environmental specialist Matthew Dillon of American Colloid, mine supervisor Dale Nuttall of Wyo-Ben, and mining operations manager Jason Schneider of American Colloid analyze the reclamation process on a Montana bentonite mine.

Bentonite industry booms with resurgent economy

By MARTIN KIBSTON
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GREYBULL — Applications to mine “the clay of 1,000 uses” are pouring into the Bureau of Land Management as companies look to capitalize on the bentonite boom and keep pace with the nation’s rebounding economy.

From mines at Frazzle to Bearcreek, companies have ramped up production, racing to extract a commodity that was deposited millions of years ago as volcanic ash and chemically reworked in a shallow, inland seaway.

At M-1 Swaco’s mine east of Greybull, BLM geologist Gretchen Hurley holds a lump of bentonite in her hand. With the consistency of Play-Doh, the clump product is easily shaped, rolled and squeezed.

“I think the new applications are a result of companies trying to get ahead of the permitting curve, because it takes a while to permit one of these mines,” Hurley said. “If we can get them approved for a 500-acre mine, that’ll keep them supplied in bentonite for 10 to 30 years.”

Bentonite has the ability to swell to 10 times its original size and absorb 10 times its weight in water. It’s used in cat litter and beauty supplies and as a binding agent in animal feed. It’s also used in foundry work and in drilling, including in the Bakken field of North Dakota.

The clay’s industrial uses tie it directly to the nation’s energy and auto industries. With the economy



Bentonite, known as the “clay of 1,000 uses,” comes in a variety of qualities, each suited for a different use.

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